

The Work Couch

Navigating today's tricky people challenges to create tomorrow's sustainable workplaces

RPC



Episode 18 – Bonus Live episode: Exploring the cost of untapped talent with Tskenya-Sarah Frazer, Trevor Sterling and Mark Ash

Ellie: Before we share today's episode, we wanted to give our listeners a quick content warning. We'll be discussing some challenging themes, including racism, crime, and alcohol and drug addiction, which some listeners might find distressing. With that in mind, we would advise listener discretion as to whether you feel comfortable listening to this episode.

Hi, and welcome to the Work Couch Podcast, your fortnightly deep dive into all things employment.

Brought to you by the award-winning employment team at law firm RPC, we discuss the whole spectrum of employment law with the emphasis firmly on people. My name is Ellie Gelder. I'm a senior editor in the employment equality and engagement team here at RPC, and I will be your host as we explore the constantly evolving and consistently challenging world of employment law and all the curve balls that it brings to businesses today.

We hope by the end of the podcast that you'll feel better prepared to respond to these people challenges in a practical, commercial, and inclusive way. And to make sure you don't miss any of our fortnightly episodes, please do hit the like and follow button and share with a colleague.

Ellie: Today, in a special bonus episode to close season two of The Work Couch, we are very excited to be recording our first ever live episode with three inspirational guests on the theme of untapped talent and unlocking opportunities with a diverse workforce. And we're thrilled to be joined by a special audience of leading retailers. Our panel discussion kicks off the British Retail Consortium's second annual Diversity and Inclusion conference held in partnership with RPC and forms part of a programme of sessions where BRC members will learn through our expert speakers how leaders can empower and uplift colleagues from a wide range of lived experiences. Thank you so much to all three of our panellists for coming today. To introduce you, first of all, we welcome [Tskenya Fraser](#), Pride of Britain award-winning entrepreneur, author and diversity and inclusion consultant. Tskenya also delivered a fantastic workshop with RPC's Kelly Thomson at the end of last year to [BRC D&I charter](#) signatories on the topic of body pledges. So some of you may well recognise Tskenya. We also welcome [Trevor Sterling](#), senior partner at Moore Barlow, who in 2021 became the first black senior partner in a top 100 UK law firm. Trevor is chair of the [Mary Seacole Trust](#), which promotes diversity and social equality. He's also the founder of [U Triumph](#), which is a platform promoting social mobility. And he also hosts [U Triumph social mobility podcasts](#), which are brilliant by the way and well worth listening to. And finally, a warm welcome to Mark Ash. Mark is the lived experience coordinator at [Forward Trust](#), a leading charity that empowers people to break cycles of addiction or crime to move forward with their lives. Mark uses his own experience of addiction, homelessness, and having been in prison to support others facing the same challenges. And that is just a really tiny snapshot of everything that our three guests are involved with. So do check out their full bios on the show notes.

So, Tskenya, can we start with you, please, and hear about your story, particularly some of the intersectional barriers that you've encountered and also some of the challenges that you still face today.

Tskenya: Gosh, that's part of the reason why I'm taking the summer off is because those challenges persist. But I have to really start at the beginning in order for us to get like a full picture. So the youngest of five children, very humble beginnings. Was born in Hackney pre-gentrification when you had to be home before 6.30, or you would definitely be robbed. The first of my mother's children to go to university, went to a really good university. And I always start there because obviously when you grow up in a place like Hackney, which is a really beautiful, eclectic cultural hub with such rich diversity, when we think about things like racism, they were almost kind of like, I suppose, theories in the sky. You know we had people in our classes that were from all different ethnicities. Of course, there were things like colourism and texturism at play, but nothing that was so overt. And I always share that because when I went to university to study English at King's College, I thought I might go on and do a PhD in something really left-wing feminist studies or black feminist studies or something. And that was my first place where I realised actually maybe this is not a space for me. I felt so disenfranchised by the education establishment because of the racism and classism I had experienced. So kind of like gave up on those dreams of going on to be a Doctor of Social Sciences. And I thought, let me turn my head towards journalism, where I encountered the same things. Wanting to do internships, but obviously being a working-class girl couldn't do these unpaid internships. I also didn't speak the language or have the social coding of a lot of the other young women that I was doing these internships with. And so I decided to start my first business, which was a triad of magazines to help give folk like myself the opportunity to demonstrate their writing prowess. And I absolutely loved that. But then again, felt like maybe this wasn't an industry for me. And I started that business when I was at university. And it was in my final year of university where I started the business that I've always wanted to start, which was footwear. I have a size nine foot, could never find shoes in my size, wide feet too. And it was around graduation time, I was having a discussion with my non-binary friends who present in a masculine body going into retail shops, asking for shoes in the size nine and 10. And the shop attendants looking and saying, "Oh, you shouldn't really be wearing heels". And it was that conversation I guess sparked me in wanting to start this business. There was a footwear business free from gendered marketing, really sustainable, made of all vegan materials for anyone, regardless of their gender expression, wherever they come from wanting to wear stylish shoes. But obviously I always describe myself as a side entrepreneur. Bootstrapping a business is difficult and it's very, very expensive. So alongside running that business, I've been doing diversity and inclusion consultancy work for gosh, the past eight years now and the reason why I joke and say you know those challenges persist despite all of my I guess my accolades my experiences working with clients on a day-to-day basis that say that they value diversity and inclusion but don't want to hear that expert voice aren't really interested in truly intersectional radical systemic change within their businesses where I think only diversity inclusion work can thrive if we're really going to be looking at it from a systemic real change level. I guess has left me in a place where I think I just need a little siesta, a little break to recalibrate how we might be able to discuss diversity and inclusion I guess in a new way, at that place of really thinking about culture, because yes, those conversations were sparked around 2020, but people have been having conversations about DEI, my mum was having conversations about DEI in the workplace, and still there hasn't quite been that shift yet. So that's where I'm at in relation to my experience.

Ellie: And Trevor, something you're passionate about is social mobility. And in your role as senior partner at Moore Barlow, you describe being the ladder and being a role model to others. So just tell us a bit about your story.

Trevor: Yes, I have a mantra, and hello everybody, I have a mantra which is don't just aspire to climb the ladder, aspire to be the ladder. And that really comes from my own journey. So my life, working life in particular is one of sliding doors. So the first half is before the doors slid and then I'll come to the second half. So first off, my parents are from Jamaica. Part of the Windrush generation, who came over in the late 1950s. They settled initially in Clapham where there was a labour exchange. A lot of the Windrush generation settled there. A very difficult time, very difficult introduction to the country. So at that point we all lived essentially in just one room which they rented until eventually my parents moved to Mitcham. Sadly, they moved to the wrong part of Mitcham. They moved to what happened to be a very racist part of Mitcham. It was Pollard's Hill. So that was where I was schooled. A lot of racism that I suspect the audience is probably too young to remember, but that's when there was the National Front and many skinheads. So my idea of school was being able to get there and get home safely in reality. And when I was there trying to keep out of trouble in the classrooms because there

was a risk you might bump into some of the skinheads. So I did what became inevitable. I left school at 16 and only had the two O levels. And this is the sliding door moment. So I wasn't working at 16 and the careers officer, careers advisor rang me. And I went to see him, and he gave me three job options. And one was a tennis racket stringer, a warehouse man. And the third was an outdoor clerk effectively delivering legal papers for a law firm. And just by chance, I took the outdoor clerk job because I could go home to my parents and say, "Hey, I'm going to be a solicitor". Of course I was making it up. But lo and behold, when I sat in the office, I had driven there in my orange Morris Marina, which I'd crashed a week before. So it was incredibly embarrassing. And I looked around at these lawyers and I thought, hang on, I could do this. So I began studying and I worked evenings and weekends. I studied law in any way I possibly could. I took a dictating machine home. I would stare in the mirror; I would read letters and I would just learn and teach myself to be a lawyer. And by the time I was 23, I became a legal executive. 25, I became a solicitor. By the time I was 28, I became a partner, the first black partner with that law firm and their youngest ever partner. And my journey has taken me on to being the co-lead lawyer in all the Jimmy Saville cases. I led on the Croydon Tram cases. I was involved with the Westminster terror attacks. And currently I'm involved with the Wimbledon Prep School tragedy. And ironically, just before I came and I did an ITV interview, one of the things you'll see, although it was a very bleak interview, was that I couldn't help but feel a sense of pride. And that was because as I saw the interviewer walking towards me, it was a black interviewer, black journalist. And he was thinking, my goodness, black lawyer. And I was thinking, my goodness, a black interviewer. So we did that interview. My career now, in 2021, I became the first black senior partner in a top 100 UK law firm. And when I look at that entire journey, I have one thing in my mind, and that is, you mustn't aspire just to climb the ladder, you must aspire to be the ladder. So what I learned was it really isn't about qualification, it's about application. And that's the message I always look to deliver.

We've got to make sure the younger me's that are out there now, and there are many of them, from those lower socioeconomic backgrounds, are given that opportunity.

Ellie: Thanks, Trevor. Mark, can I bring you in here? Your story is also a powerful example of how difficult circumstances, in your case, undiagnosed neurodivergence at school can have a really devastating impact and it can set you off on a destructive path and in your words, become an outcast. So can you just tell us a bit about your story before you turned it around?

Mark: Yeah, so I'm not from a broken home. My parents are together. They've been married for nearly 50 years now. Middle child. Both of my sisters left school with straight A's. I think they might even have stars next to. Unfortunately, for me, there was a difficulty in learning, so I couldn't read, write, spell, add up or draw. And I think back in the 70s or 80s, maybe that awareness and how to treat certain individuals with certain difficulties may not have been there for us to be treated correctly. And so, you know, the sort of like the go-to thing to do with certain kids back then was to take them out of mainstream class and put them in learning support. And, you know, you might just be in there with either one person or maybe two people in the tutor. And, you know, it can sort of start to have an impact because you're being taken away from the from the class. But when you're in that class, you can't learn at the same pace as everyone else and to keep up the pace and to keep up the, the, the pretending of learning, copying someone else's work. You know, you're not able to pay attention and, know, you're given, you know, you're just given homework that you just, you can't do It's like the brain is, eight years old, but actually the learning is probably like a four-year-old or something like that. But they're trying to move me at the same pace as an eight-year-old. And therefore, you know, that learning difficulty can't read, can't write, can't spell, can't draw, can't add up, follows me into secondary school, where I then can't keep up with the homework. I still can't get up at the pace of the learning. And therefore, the headmaster, you know, says to your dad, "Mr. Ash, unfortunately, your son can't do his homework". And he described me to my dad as "He's like a goldfish out of his bowl". And so, yeah, when you're told that, unfortunately, you know, from your father about what the headmaster says, it starts to feed into what you already start to believe: that you don't fit, that there is something wrong with you. Do you know what I mean? It can become quite emotional because there's a lot of years lost just due to maybe things not being picked up on. You know, there was one point where I couldn't even write. I mean, it's quite difficult. And so this follows me into secondary school. and unfortunately, there are certain chemicals that you might put into alcohol or put into drugs and this certain

chemical within these particular substances, once I drank it, one of those chemicals, tweaked in my mind and made me fit in. Instead of giving me like, say, an antidepressant to keep me stable, to give me a prescribed drug, the first thing that actually I found that sort of... stabled out my mind, if that's even a truth or a myth, I don't know. So even though I still had these difficulties, I actually started to just be more sort of alive, just wanting to fit in with people. But the lie then kind of sets in where I'm young, I'm hiding the difficulties now. I'm hiding the stuff from my parents. And the alcohol is starting to make me believe this is what you need, and from there, unfortunately, it just went mad. It just went into some very dark places. Which I will go into, but the thing is we have to, we all go through traumas, and we all go through certain difficulties in life. Some of us know not have come up against it yet, you know what mean? But we can all fall into a place of difficulty. And I guess it's just what support we've got around us at the time and how willing we are to try and get out. So I guess... I will go deep with you as we go on. Yeah. But I guess, I guess the main thing is to look at maybe who I am now as I tell my story as opposed to who I was then.

Ellie: Absolutely, and we will definitely get onto that. Thank you for sharing that, Mark. Thank you all for giving us that insight into the various challenges that you've all successfully overcome. And on that note, let's hear about the essential ingredients that helped you turn those experiences into a positive. So Tskanya, you've done incredible things. You've mentioned your footwear business. So tell us about those successes and also who or what helped you.

Tskanya: What you're saying there really resonates with me because I started my business with the support of the Prince's Trust. Amazing charity that helps support young people get into entrepreneurship but also get into work and build up the necessary, sometimes even social skills to be able to get into the workplace. And I always count the Trust as being that real marker of my success. I had all of the ingredients in order to do something but didn't know how to turn it into something. Working class, black girl, neurodivergent, I'm an ADHDer, autism and ADHD, you know, when I went to the trust, didn't know where to start. Despite, you know, all of the hardships I had faced up until that point, they said to me that there is no barrier to entry for you at the trust. That's why I think it's such a transformative charity that if you have an idea, if you want to get somewhere, they'll help you get there. One of the key things that really helped me is that they matched me up to a business mentor. And again, at this time I was newly diagnosed with an ADHD. I didn't really know that this was a "tism" thing. I'm very specific. And I said, if I was going to have a business mentor, they need to think like me. Didn't really quite have the language at the time. And then we need to have similar experiences. And they matched me up with a fantastic woman who wasn't diagnosed, but definitely an ADHDer when I look back on it, of South Asian descent and grew up working class. And she helped me really build the business, build the business plan, look at my financials to get me to that place for me to be able to get that £4,000 loan from the trust. And when I think about those markers of success, it's having moments where you can share, and I'm thinking about you even in the work that you do, being able to share your lived experience in order to empower someone else. The conversations I had with this business mentor really empowered me to know that despite my intersections and my beginnings, I could do whatever the hell I wanted. So that was definitely, I would say, a real marker of, you know, helping me become the person I am today. I think through that relationship with that business mentor, I really started to understand the power of community. So I went and sought out other, women entrepreneurs, people of global majority, neurodivergent entrepreneurs and help form a really great business community with them, even if it was just through WhatsApp or whether it was through Instagram, we were connected, and we're still connected to this day. And that idea of community as something that can help us succeed still resonates with me. That's the reason why I won my Pride of Britain award for things that I've done in community. So I think one, having those shared experiences with people that you're in community with are really, really important as markers of your success, but also, I think around the things that you can do for yourself. I always talk very openly about, my journey and the struggles that I've had in having to seek out therapy and coaching, but having that tertiary person there outside of your friends and family, friends and family are great, but having that unbiased ear to help you work through some of those challenges have been really transformational for me as a woman, as an entrepreneur, as a person, as a citizen of the world.

Ellie: Fantastic. And Mark, your life is now unrecognisable to the one that you led before you went to prison. Just tell us a bit about how you turn things around.

Mark: Yeah, so I guess a bit of a backstory. I've been to prison twice. I've been a drug addict for like nearly 15 years or so. I've been stabbed six times, I've been street homeless for three years and I've been caught up in county lines. And so, yeah, I was 39 when I went to prison. I weren't too pleased with the judge when he sent me down, but... But when I look back on it, he actually done me a favour. Do you know what I mean? Like he helped me out. Like I... The judgement of, like, you know, my actions, you know, through certain, you know... criminality, which was only to feed my, you know, my drug addiction, although I was also contributing to, you know, crime within the communities, which I'm not proud of. I have, I have made them I've been making amends for five years now. I've been really giving back as much as I can because I understand the errors of, of my ways, even though I had the learning difficulties, I should have to take full responsibility for the actions that I caused through my drug addiction. So yeah, no, I went to prison like 2019 and got sentenced to 40 months, to do 20. I actually only did like 17 months because they let me out on tag, I guess because of the progress that I was making at the time. It wasn't that the prisons were full up and they had to get rid of people. It was genuinely because I was making, you know, I was showing real good progress. I mean, I was an enhanced prisoner the two prisons that I personally know can rehabilitate. But I must show that willingness and that desire to want to be rehabilitated. I really want to stress that it's not a holiday camp. If you want to change your life in prison, you can change your life. I went in there on a 40-mil methadone script, because obviously I'm going in there a heroin addict. I decided at 39, being in prison, that it's time to change. The willingness was there. The desire may not have been there, because I didn't actually know what it looked like. That's my life for like 15, 20 years. So what does this change look like?

I wanted to change. I did have that fear of coming out homeless, but I wanted to change. My parents were coming up every month to visit me. My family were coming up. I decided I need to just see what is out there for me. This cannot be my life. so Forward Trust are in there. A key worker will come and see you when you land in prison if you have substance misuse. And I decided that I was going to at least engage and see what it's all about. Family ties was the most important thing to me because even though my parents were there, you know, and coming up, I'd forgotten about what love meant, what honesty meant, what it meant, you know, to be a family. So I was just happy to see them because my mum was going to buy me a can of Coke that I hadn't had for eight months. Or I could have a Mars bar today. But I started to engage in treatment. And for the first time, I was in groups, and I was around like-minded people that have had the same struggles as me. And it broke that bondage of thinking that it was just me, that it was just me going through these struggles, but actually I could start relating to other prisoners, you know, especially in the group setting. On my own trying to learn, it was a little bit difficult, but the power of change and learning about myself came from being in a group with other people. And so I did all of the crimes and its effects and the damage that I'd done. And I started learning about the coping with triggers and impulsive decision-making, looking after myself, all the drug treatment programs that I could do, as well as then just trying to find me. Like my mum didn't give birth to an addict. My mum didn't give birth to a criminal, so to speak. Obviously, any event can turn you into something. It's how you handle it though. Do you know what I mean? But my mum knew who I was. She knew Mark up to 15. Then she lost Mark from 15 up until he's 39, but she held onto the Mark that she knew. So I needed to also find myself about the person that she believes she knew. And I was able to do that. But also, I needed something bigger as well. So I found Forward Trust. I learned about myself. I had my family around me and then I found faith and they say in recovery that whatever works for you, work it. So you must find what works for you and work it. And the three ingredients obviously that I needed was, you know, me to change, to want to change, the Forward Trust to actually want to listen to me and help you change, and then find some faith and some spirituality at the same time.

Ellie: And tell us about that turning point as well. That was very special for you.

Mark: Yeah. So when I left prison, I went into a recovery house because I was already abstinent, so it's abstinent living. But the courses and support was still there for me. And I was in there for about 16 months. And after a year of working on myself, finding myself, knowing who I am, building the relationships back with my family, reintegrating, back into society. I knew what I wanted to do when I left prison. After two weeks, I knew that I wanted to go back in to help others, do you know what mean? To help those that helped me to help others. But the key word was like, Mark, you've only been out two weeks, do you know what I mean? You've to work on yourself, you've got to work on yourself before you can help other people, do you know what mean? But I knew from that onset, with all of that background, I've got no grades. I've got no GCSEs. I've left school, nothing. All I've got is like, well, not all I've got. I'm proud of what I've got. I've got an advice and guidance level three, and I've got a level two in substance misuse. And that's all I've got. What I have got, I've got a PhD in lived experience. Do you know what I mean?

So I've become a peer mentor and I did that for a year and nine months, just sort of sharing my experience, strength and hope to others, you know what mean? Just to let them know, you know, we can all take a difficult, have a difficult time in life, you know, we can take certain paths that might not be good for us, and we can be stuck in that position. But I'm looking for the similarities with you and not necessarily the differences. And so I sort of built on that as a peer mentor. Just helping others, was picking men and women up from every prison in London, taking them to recovery houses, taking them home, taking them to probation. And then I got into a traineeship with Forward Trust, a recovery practitioner. did that for about nine months. Then I think, you know, I must've got scouted. And then they said, We want to employ you. You know what mean? And then, and then I became 2022. I was employed as a full member of staff as a recovery navigator. Eight months later, they was like, you know, I think you need to step up again to be a lived experience coordinator. And so now I've come sort of full circle whereas a coordinator, I'm now working with peer mentors to do exactly what I was doing in the beginning to try and help them come through. Now they're not mine. So wherever they want to go, I encourage that. My organisation, another organisation, that's what it's all about. It's not about me trying to "oh well you're mine, I want to keep you". The idea is that I carry the message and I then have to make you greater than me. And then when you are greater than me, the person you help has to then be greater than you. So we're just that progression.

Ellie: Thank you. So Trevor, going back to your mantra of being the ladder and moving the dial for others, does that mantra come from your experiences of being marginalised or does it stem from your senior role in a law firm or is it a bit of both?

Trevor: So it's a bit of both and I don't see it as a responsibility. I see it as a privilege, and I'll explain why. But you know, there's a, for me, growing up in the environment which I grew up in, I was always of the view that where you have hope, then your aspirations become a reality. Where you have no hope, then hopelessness becomes your reality. And so growing up, for a number of reasons, I felt kind of hopeless, partly because the stereotype that existed in school. Somebody like me was not going to be very clever. We were probably going to be trouble. There was also that sense through racism of anger. And if you look at pictures of me when I was 13 or 14 I was wearing the Malcolm X glasses because that was my anger coming out. And the reason there was that anger was because I remember when I was at school, and I've never told this story before, but actually I was eight years old. And I was the only black kid in my entire year at school. And there was only a few in school. So all the kids would laugh at me. They would laugh at my hair. They would laugh at how I looked, all of those things. And that kind of embedded that sense of hopelessness because I was so different. And I remember going home and just going straight upstairs and going to the bedroom and just crying my eyes out. I felt somehow that I'd been cursed. Why was I so different? Why was I treated this way? And when I was 13 or 14, just walking down the street, I got stopped by the police, police van, which is called the SPG, Special Patrol Group. And they said that somebody had been suspected of breaking into a house. And they put me in the back of the van. They drove three or four miles and then said, oh, mistaken identity. You can get out now. And I had a four or five mile walk back. So that was the level of hurt and anger. And what then happens is there was that 'sliding doors' moment and opportunity came my way and I stopped feeling hopeless but started feeling hopeful. And I think that we've all got this, every one of us has this button, it's a button of self-belief, but only some of us

press it and actually, the more privileged your background, the more you're told through your school years, you're great. You're going to do great. You're going to do great. You'll press that button of self-belief. For others of us, we don't press the button. We don't believe it's going to give rise to anything. So I managed to find that sense of hopefulness and self-belief. I pressed the button. It may have been later than I should have done, but I pressed it. And what I learned was this, and I describe it as the Karman Line effect. And the Karman line is the point at which if you're in a spacecraft and you're trying to exit the Earth's atmosphere, you reach the Karman Line. That's the point at which there is no longer a gravitational pull. And so in this context, gravity are those societal challenges, racism and all the other things that can impact us that can really pull you down and pull you back and what it requires to get to the Karman Line is obviously fuel. And that fuel has to be positive fuel, it's positive energy. And so all of those traumas, all those issues, all those challenges, I converted into this positive fuel. And that enabled me to get to the Karman Line. And when you get to the Karman Line, this is the point around being senior partner or being senior, this is why you need more diversity in boardrooms.

When you get to the Karman Line, you don't have the same impact of gravity. So at that point, you can truly make a difference. When you reach the Karman Line, it's your job, if you like, but it's a privilege because you got there to look back down and to help others to reach the Karman Line. That is being the ladder. And it's incredibly important that we recognise that if we can get more and more people to the Karman Line. The reason why society changes, because at that point of seniority, you can make structural change. You can make structural change, whether it be in your business, you can make structural changes in society to make things fairer. And you're actually just giving people the positive fuel to get there. So the tipping point for me was that as I was going up, there was less gravity, and I was able to make more of a positive impact. But you don't just make the impact when you're there. By the time I was 25, I used the energy from those traumas, and I set up a mentoring scheme. And that for me was very important. And that gave me even more positive energy. By the time I was 29 or 30, I thought to myself, if I could afford to send my kids to private school, then what I will actually do is I will adopt. And I adopted, I took a child who's the child that features in my Sterling carpool clips. And it's made a difference. So as she's grown up, it's given me more positive fuel. It makes me more determined to be the ladder. So the idea of when you get to that Karman Line, it's not a responsibility, but it's an intrinsic motivation you have so that others don't have to go through those same challenges.

Ellie: Mark, I just wanted to pick up on the practical difficulties you had when you were trying to overcome your addiction because you actually worked in the retail sector. And just explain the challenges you had and then also the environment you now work in. So how retailers and other employers might be able to implement similar support measures that you now have at the Forward Trust.

Mark: I guess, yes, I won't be like mentioning the company that I was working for because I don't think that the fault would actually wholly lie with them. I think it's more around like, how would they deal with someone like me? So like if I'm not coming to work under the influence, but I am say on prescribed medication that allows me to work, but the prescribed medication is methadone and methadone is a substitute for heroin. And say, you're asking me if I can do overtime, but I can never do overtime because I need to get to the pharmacy to pick up my script. Like, it's coming from a place of like, how do I approach you as a team leader, as a service manager and say, "well, boss, you know, I'm not coming to work under the influence. I'm still able. But there's nothing wrong with me because I'm on a script but I'm on methadone and I'm an ex-heroin user", you know, I wouldn't even know where I didn't even know where to start. But you know, I'm just coming from my experience. I just didn't believe at the time that you would just, that you would sort of understand and know how to deal with me.

Just like you don't want to bring your stuff to work, I guess, like, and just that feeling of just losing your job or being asked to leave.

Thankfully, I'm working for an organisation that takes on people with my past. So I'm in a unique place, aren't I? I don't necessarily have to worry about what's on my DBS. I don't have to worry about that I haven't got no grades because they just want my lived experience. But I get clinical supervision support monthly, like three days of well-being hours a year sort of given to me. I pay into a Simply Health scheme. I have service managers and team leaders that actually understand someone in recovery, know what to do with someone who, you

know, know how to signpost someone. I've sat in a room this big before and no one knew what AA was. No one knew what NA was when I said I actually had to say narcotics anonymous, alcoholics anonymous. No one really knows what AI -Anon is, do you know what mean? It's like families that have someone in addiction. So people just didn't really know about the support. But I'm in a prime position where they understand. And that's why we're actually offering information sessions where we can come along and talk to your organisation. Because we all struggle at work. I might work for them but I'm an honest bloke. Sometimes it is hard. Sometimes the admin is difficult for me, but I'm able to actually express that. The thing is the support is there, the safety net is there, do you know what mean? For me to openly say something, my authentic self and say what my struggle is, without you then possibly thinking he ain't capable for the job.

Ellie: Yeah, absolutely. And Forward Trust is doing amazing work in raising that awareness. So Tskenya, I just want to finish by asking you what would be on your wish list for the audience today and for our on-demand listeners in terms of tangible actions to support, include and progress untapped talent.

Tskenya: I guess the two, I'll give you two things, two things I think really create transformation and change. I'm going to say that keyword allyship. Now we always talk about allyship. I'm not talking about buying a book and reading about gender, and racism and neurodivergence. Of course, those things are great to start there to bolster your knowledge so that you have at least good, good knowledge to start with. But I'm talking about sponsorship, thinking about how within the workplace and in your general lives as well, how you can lift up other people and pay it forward. I think everyone can be a scholar with the books, but to be a good sponsor and to be a confidant of people in the workplace and in your private lives is a skill and is a muscle that we should be flexing and we should be developing to understand through that allyship that experiences are intersectional, that even if we are thinking about how we can be a great sponsor to people who are underserved, under tapped talent, that even within those diversities there's a diversity. I always give this example because I worked for a company and the CEO pulled me up once. And she said, I'm really loving that you've diversified this board, but you know, I think there's been a bit of bias at play here. She came in I said, "Me? I'm your director of diversity and inclusion, what do you mean bias?" And I had to look at the people that I had kind of like pulled through those ranks. All the girlies that like all from the inner city, all women of colour. And I said, "yikes", even I fell out to affinity bias. So I think allyship and making sure that it's intersectional is a key thing. And on top of that, I think investment. And when I talk about investment is that as we go through these really precarious times as businesses ebb and fall, the first teams that get cut, so they're usually HR teams and their DEI culture teams, CSR teams, ESG teams now, and understanding that if we really want to have the future of business, that it's truly profitable and sustainable, that we have to keep investing in those teams, the knowledge and I guess the emotional understanding of those teams through CPD, through continuous learning, and that costs money. But I promise in making that investment, not only do you, you know, certify that your business is one for the future, but it's a huge investment in your people at the same time. So two things: allyship and investment.

Ellie: Thank you. That is a brilliant note to end on. Thank you, Tskanya, Trevor and Mark. Your stories all provide real pause for thought and the perfect backdrop actually for all employers, including retailers, to think about those practical measures that they can take to support those who face barriers, often behind closed doors, to help them progress and reach their full potential regardless of their circumstances. You are all proof that that is possible with an inclusive working environment.

Well, that brings us to the end of this special episode of The Work Couch. Thank you also to our wonderful live audience and to those of you listening on demand. The Work Couch is going to have a short break over August, but if you've missed any of our previous episodes, do take a look at our [episode menu](#). We are really proud of our diverse back catalogue. We have over 35 episodes now.

And we'd like to extend a big thank you to all our many wonderful guests for joining us over the last year. We will be back with season three in September, so we hope you'll join us again then.

If you would like to revisit anything we discussed today, you can access transcripts of every episode of The Work Couch podcast by going to our website: www.rpc.co.uk/theworkcouch. Or, if you have questions for me or any of our speakers, or perhaps suggestions of topics you would like us to cover on a future episode of The Work Couch, please get in touch by emailing us at theworkcouch@rpc.co.uk – we would love to hear from you.



RPC is a modern, progressive and commercially focused City law firm. We are based in London, Hong Kong, Singapore and Bristol. We put our clients and our people at the heart of what we do.